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STATE FOR NEA, NEA/IPA, NEA/PPD

WHITE HOUSE FOR PRESS OFFICE, SIT ROOM  
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JERUSALEM ALSO FOR ICD  
LONDON ALSO FOR HKANONA AND POL  
PARIS ALSO FOR POL  
ROME FOR MFO  
E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: IS\_KMDR MEDIA REACTION REPORT  
SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

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SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:  
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Mideast

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Key stories in the media:  
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Israel Radio quoted President Bush as saying in Brussels Tuesday that he and the European leaders with whom he met believe that peace in the Middle East is "within reach." The President also said that the upcoming London conference is "a meeting at which President Abbas will hear that the United States and the EU is desirous of helping this good man set up a democracy in the Palestinian territories, so that Israel will have a democratic partner in peace." All media also quoted Bush as saying: "This notion that the U.S. is getting ready to attack Iran is simply ridiculous. And having said that, all options are on the table."

The nomination on Tuesday by Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz of Maj. Gen. Dan Halutz as the next IDF chief of staff dominates the media. Ha'aretz and other media quoted senior military sources as saying that, due to the proximity of the date of the evacuation of settlements under the disengagement plan, IDF C-o-S Moshe Ayalon will retire toward the end of June. The choice of Halutz provoked mixed reactions, as left-wing politicians are particularly critical of the move. (Leading media note Halutz's long-time affinities with PM Sharon, his son Omri, and the Likud party.) All media recalled Halutz's nonchalant attitude, as IAF commander, to the bombing of innocent civilians during the July 2002 pinpointed assassination of Hamas military leader Salah Shehadeh.

Jerusalem Post reported that under pressure from international business and diplomatic elements, Sharon has decided to reconsider a cabinet decision made in June to demolish all of the homes in Gaza Strip settlements slated for evacuation under the disengagement plan. Israel Radio reported that Vice Premier Shimon Peres is preparing a plan, according to which greenhouses and "active businesses" in areas to be evacuated would be presented to the Palestinians, allowing them to earn a livelihood. Maariv reported that the Disengagement Administration is considering moving the residents of Homesh, a settlement near Nablus which is slated for evacuation, to the kibbutzim Yad-Hana and Bahan, west of the Green Line. Similarly, Yediot reported that Kibbutz Carmiya, which belongs to the Meretz/Yahad-affiliated kibbutz movement, will take in dozens of settlers from Nissanit in the Gaza Strip.

Ha'aretz and Jerusalem Post quoted Col. Yossi Kuperwasser, the head of IDF Intelligence's research department, as telling the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee Tuesday that the terrorist groups continue to prepare "strategic" attacks and to produce Qassam rockets and mortars. Israel Radio reported that three mortar shells were fired at the Gaza Strip settlement of Ganei Tal this morning.

Jerusalem Post cited the Knesset's Finance Committee as saying Tuesday that Police Insp. Gen. Moshe Karadi requested a 61.1 million-shekel budget supplement (around USD 14 million) from the committee in order to handle "serious threats" of attacks on the Temple Mount.

Ha'aretz quoted PA legislators as saying that Palestinian PM Ahmed Qurei agreed on Tuesday to revamp

his proposed cabinet with more reform-minded ministers, and to present the new government to parliament today. This morning, Israel Radio reported that the crisis over the formation of the new cabinet is continuing. Leading media reported that the PA on Tuesday welcomed President Bush's call for the creation of a contiguous Palestinian state and a freeze of settlement activity, and that it reiterated its commitment to stopping terror attacks on Israel. Jerusalem Post says that the White House hopes to capitalize on Abbas's election in order to convince the U.S. Congress to help fund projects in the PA.

In an interview with Yediot, Jordan's incoming Ambassador to Israel, Marouf al-Bakhit, urged Israel to release the Jordanian prisoners it detains. Al-Bakhit told Jerusalem Post that "recognizing the right of return is important," but that "the implementation of the right of return is different and it is up to the parties concerned."

Jerusalem Post reported that the IDF's Judge Advocate-General, Avi Mandelblit, told the Knesset's Constitution, Justice and Law Committee on Tuesday that if the quiet with the Palestinians holds, the army will consider returning to the policy of having the Military Police investigate every incident in which a Palestinian is killed by IDF troops.

Jerusalem Post and Israel Radio reported that on Monday, the central committee of the World Council Churches, an organization representing up to a half-billion Christians worldwide, including more than 340 Protestant and Orthodox churches in over 120 countries, announced its decision to encourage its member churches to divest from companies that participate in "illegal activities" in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Maariv reported that around 30 far-Left students heckled Israel's Ambassador to Italy Ehud Gol before he gave a lecture at the University of Florence on Tuesday.

Yediot reported that on Tuesday, the Elta Company presented the new generation of Israeli spy satellites, which will be able to produce detailed photographs of every point on earth on a 24-hour basis.

Yediot reported that Bank of Israel Governor-designate Stanley Fischer underwent a Shin Bet interrogation on Monday, because he will have access to confidential materials.

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Mideast:  
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Summary:  
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Independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz editorialized: "This American policy is not dependent on who is head of the Israeli government, just as the demand of the Palestinian leadership did not become any less rigid as the chairmanship passed from Arafat to Abbas."

Veteran spokesperson of the settlement movement Yehudit Tayar "addresses" Ariel Sharon in conservative, independent Jerusalem Post: "You have with your bulldozer style trampled on our rights as citizens; but even worse, you have virtually ripped the country in pieces."

Gadi Baltiansky, Director General of the Geneva Initiative Headquarters, wrote in popular, pluralist Maariv: "Now we can build the fence ... and ... later dismantle sections of it in the last part of the story that is known in advance. But things can also be different. It can also be decided, in an act of leadership of which Ariel Sharon is capable, to end the march of folly."

Yahad (Meretz) Knesset Member Avshalom Vilan wrote in Ha'aretz: "A bizarre coalition of settlers from the hilly area of Israel and fundamentalist Christians from the American heartland ... is fighting in unison against territorial concessions of any sort in the Holy Land.... This ideological coalition presents a genuine danger to Israel-U.S. relations."

Block Quotes:  
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**I. "The Context Is the Message"**

Independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz editorialized (February 23): "The importance of Bush's comments in Brussels [on Monday] is not their content, but their context -- the time, the place and the audience. Since laying out his [two-state] vision for the first time, Bush has waged war on Iraq ... Yasser Arafat has died and has been replaced by Mahmoud Abbas ... and Ariel Sharon has initiated the evacuation of all of Israel's military presence and every settlement from the entire Gaza Strip, and four settlements in the northern West Bank. Even though he made no direct reference to it in his Brussels speech, Bush clearly supports the Sharon plan.... The location that Bush chose for his speech is also significant: Brussels, the capital of Europe and home to the headquarters of both the European Union and NATO. Bush came to Brussels as the winner in his country's elections, and it is he alone who formulates the policies of his administration, an administration that has been cleansed of dissenters such as former secretary of state Colin Powell.... Bush's target

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audience was made up not only of the Europeans, but also of Abbas and Sharon. Abbas was told that the opportunity that has opened up in front of him is momentary and fleeting. To Sharon -- and perhaps no less than him, his Likud opponents who hope to scupper the disengagement -- Bush sent a reminder that a Palestinian state will not be cobbled together by pieces of non-contiguous land. This American policy is not dependent on who is head of the Israeli government, just as the demand of the Palestinian leadership did not become any less rigid as the chairmanship passed from Arafat to Abbas."

**II. "Arik, You've Let Me Down"**

Veteran spokesperson of the settlement movement Yehudit Tayar "addresses" Ariel Sharon in conservative, independent Jerusalem Post (February 23): "I once so admired you, Ariel Sharon. Now you, along with your patched-up, opportunist government, have joined the pathetic ranks of those who have caved in to terror, all those 'enlightened' people who have, for reasons of overconfidence, corruption and conceit, given up on the ideals this country was built on. You have with your bulldozer style trampled on our rights as citizens; but even worse, you have virtually ripped the country in pieces.... Do not fool yourself. This Land does not belong to you. Many of us think you are attempting to erase your shady, arguably criminal activities by directing media attention toward the disengagement scheme. I can only express my disdain at your decision to destroy the national fiber, and for what? For nothing. Abraham Lincoln said: 'A house divided against itself cannot stand'.... We represent the covenant that the Jewish people have between our God and our Land. No prime minister or government decision can change that."

**III. "End the March of Folly"**

Gadi Baltiansky, Director General of the Geneva Initiative Headquarters, wrote in popular, pluralist Maariv (February 23): "The American promises with regard to the settlement blocs, the Clinton ideas, the Geneva understandings, and from now on the route of the separation fence as well -- all those point at Israel's future permanent borders. The negotiations will begin with the seven percent included on this side of the fence, and end with three-four vital percentage points, in return for which unpopulated alternative areas will be given. So now we can build the fence without talking to the Palestinians, invest billions, absorb international criticism, and all this to later dismantle sections of it in the last part of the story that is known in advance. But things can also be different. It can also be decided, in an act of leadership of which Ariel Sharon is capable, to end the march of folly.... Acknowledging reality requires beginning negotiations over the final status arrangement, knowing that an agreement that protects Israel's true interests is achievable. If we have already reached the recognition what the end will look like, it is the duty of both leaderships to bring us this end already, so that we can all enjoy the new beginning that we are so eagerly awaiting and so richly deserve.... Now we need a great leader to take a great step. Until then, perhaps it would be preferable for the security establishment not to demonstrate surprising speed in building the fence. The time that

elapses until its irrelevant sections are dismantled will be much shorter than the time that elapsed from the construction of the settlements in the Gaza Strip until their dismantlement."

IV. "A Pernicious, Dangerous Alliance"

Yahad (Meretz) Knesset Member Avshalom Vilan wrote in Ha'aretz (February 23): "A bizarre coalition of settlers from the hilly area of Israel and fundamentalist Christians from the American heartland -- and not the East or West coasts -- is fighting in unison against territorial concessions of any sort in the Holy Land.... This ideological coalition presents a genuine danger to Israel-U.S. relations.... It is liable to lead to a break in the historic link between American Jews and the Democratic Party, and even weaken the link between them and the mainstream Republican Party. This would do heavy political damage.... It is clear, as well, that even the great freedom given to the Sharon government during President Bush's first term has ended.... The Republican administration also has economic interests it must uphold -- for instance, those related to oil. In the prospective collision between economic interests and religious prattle, it is utterly clear who will pay the full political price for being on the wrong side, particularly as oil is found in the fields of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and not Israel. There is no escaping the conclusion that the unholy alliance between the Jewish and Christian extreme right wings is short-term, and absolutely runs counter to Israel's long-term interests. Thanks to painstaking work of many years, Israel has succeeded in reaching far-ranging understandings with the U.S. administration that have enabled the transfer of weapons and freedom of diplomatic maneuvering. The hyper-activity of Israeli extremist right-wing groups is liable to harm these good relations. Destroying is much easier than building."

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